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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000065

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA AND PRM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: VANNI'S CIVILIANS SQUEEZED AS ARMY
PUSHES ON; LTTE LEADERSHIP GONE UNDERGROUND

REF: A. COLOMBO 33

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 003

[1](#)C. 08 COLOMBO 1078

[1](#)D. 08 COLOMBO 1071

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Concerns for the civilians trapped by fighting in northern Sri Lanka are rising. Small but significant numbers of IDPs from the Vanni have moved to government-controlled territory as the continued advances of the Sri Lankan Army have squeezed the 300,000 population into a smaller and smaller area centered around Puthukudiyiruppu (PTK). On January 17 heavy fighting interrupted the return of the 11th World Food Programme convoy after it delivered 818 tons of food. The convoy remains trapped at PTK and has been told by the GSL it cannot leave until Thursday. The ICRC released a rare public statement highlighting the strain on the civilian population in the North. ICRC sources reported to post that they are attempting to negotiate a no-fire zone between the parties to help assist movements in and out of Tiger-held territory. Several reports indicate the LTTE leadership has gone underground and can no longer be contacted. On January 18, Army Chief Sarath Fonseka speculated that LTTE Supremo Prabakharan "may have escaped" while declaring that the Tiger leader "loves his family and his food" too much to commit suicide. The Norwegian Ambassador reported to Ambassador over the weekend that he had communicated a GSL offer of amnesty for all LTTE fighters except the top two (Prabakharan and Pottu Amman), but had yet to hear back from the LTTE. The immediate priorities now are to use all available means to encourage the LTTE to allow the IDPs to leave the Vanni, and press the GSL to allow pauses in fighting so UN can deliver food and other supplies to the IDPs while they remain. The UN here will request that UN U/SYG for Management Angela Kane, who retains a brief on Sri Lanka, try to call the LTTE and President Rajapaksa to make these points. The UNSYG himself will meet Basil Rajapaksa on Monday January 27 in New York. Japanese Special Envoy Akashi will be briefed so he too can make these points during his January 22-25 visit to Sri Lanka. End Summary.

Limited Movements of
Civilians Out of the Vanni

[1](#)2. (U) As the Army has continued to press in on Tiger-held

positions in the Vanni following the fall of Kilinochchi (Ref B), the civilian population, fleeing the encroaching front lines, has been pushed into a smaller area centered around PTK in Mullaitivu district. Large numbers of civilians are reportedly leaving Mullaitivu town headed west. Accompanying the Army's advances, a small but significant number of civilians have managed to escape. According to the UN 4,067 left the Vanni in the past two months for Jaffna and Vavuniya.

Heightened Concern for Civilians That Remain

13. (SBU) On January 17, after delivering 818 tons of food, the 11th World Food Programme convoy was prevented from leaving PTK for Vavuniya due to heavy shelling in the area. UN resident representative Buhne told Ambassador on January 20 that Army Commander Fonseka had informed the UN the convoy must remain at PTK until Thursday because the army does not wish to pause its operations. Buhne appealed to Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa who has undertaken to talk to Fonseka. Ambassador also has a call into Fonseka. WFP Head Adnan Khan reported to Ambassador that the GSL's failure to honor its safe passage agreement put into doubt the "paper commitments" issued by both sides since the guarantees WFP had received, were clearly inoperable. Khan speculated that after the convoy's eventual return the UN logistics hub in PTK might very well be closed, severely undermining WFP's ability to provide further relief supplies to North's civilians.

14. (C) The ICRC, in a rare public statement, also raised its concerns about the conditions of the civilian population. ICRC noted that no safe passage for those requiring medical attention has been arranged since January 9 and that tens of thousands of displaced civilians were now concentrated in an area so small the organization had "serious concerns" for the physical safety and hygiene of that population. ICRC sources told post the ICRC is attempting to negotiate a no-fire zone that would assist in efforts to provide relief to the Vanni's residents.

Army Chief Speculates on Prabakharan's Departure While Norwegians Pass Offer of Amnesty to LTTE

15. (C) One problem that the UN and ICRC are facing is the increasing difficulty of communicating with the LTTE leadership on operational matters. Several reports suggest the LTTE leadership has gone underground. On January 18, Army Chief Sarath Fonseka dismissed the notion that LTTE Supremo Prabakharan would commit suicide, stating that the LTTE's leader "loves his family and his food" too much to kill himself. Fonseka went on to speculate that Prabakharan may have already left the country offering Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia and South Africa as potential destinations, adding that anybody with a million dollars in their pocket could find a corrupt foreign general to hide them.

16. (C) To capitalize on their military success and encourage a quick end to the war, the Government passed a message through the Norwegian Ambassador offering amnesty for all LTTE cadres, with the exception of Prabakharan and Intelligence Chief Pottu Amman. Norwegian Ambassador Hattrem told Ambassador he was surprised the GSL had not briefed Indian Foreign Secretary Menon on this offer during Menon's visit to Colombo last week, calling into question how serious an offer this may have been.

Next Steps

17. (C) The immediate priorities now are to use all available means to encourage the LTTE to allow the IDPs to leave the Vanni, and press the GSL to allow pauses in fighting so the UN can send its convoy back to Colombo and negotiate arrangements with the GSL to deliver food and other supplies

to the IDPs while they remain in LTTE controlled areas. As communications with the LTTE become more difficult and LTTE command and control begins to break down, the UN will find it increasingly difficult to deliver food and other supplies. At the same time, LTTE command and control deteriorates, the IDPs will have a better chance of reaching GSL-controlled areas. The risk is that the LTTE will do its utmost to keep the civilians trapped as long as possible to slow the Sri Lankan army's advances. The UN here will request that UN U/SYG for Management Angela Kane, who retains a brief on Sri Lanka, try to call the LTTE and President Rajapaksa to make the points above. The UNSYG himself has tentative plans to meet Basil Rajapaksa, the President's brother and chief advisor on all political and humanitarian issues, on Monday January 27 in New York. Japanese Special Envoy Akashi will be briefed so he too can make these points during his January 22-25 visit to Sri Lanka.

Blake